

Sri Sabhapati Swami: The Forgotten Yogi of Western Esotericism

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The Tamil yogin Sri Sabhapati Swami (Śrī Sabhāpati Svāmī, c. 1828–1923/4),¹ also variously transliterated, among others, as Sabhapathy Swamy—or Swāmī—and Capāpati Cuvāmikal) has left significant imprints

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¹For issues surrounding these dates see the “Who was Sri Sabhapati Swami” section below.

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on the development of early modern yoga² as well as in South Asian, North American, and European esoteric and occult conceptions of the body. His works introduced elements of Tamil yogic practices to North India (especially British Punjab and Bengal), and he pioneered a yogic system that—on the surface—resembles one later popularised by Swami Vivekananda (Svāmī Vivekānanda, 1863–1902). Sabhapati was also a major figure in a larger movement for the publication and dissemination of editions of yogic texts in Indic vernacular languages as well as in English in nineteenth-century India. In addition, he had close contacts with some of the founding members of the Theosophical Society who later, however, severed their ties with him, and his practices went on to find a home in the alternative religio-philosophical movement Thelema. This chapter aims to generate further interest in this remarkable author by presenting an overview of Sabhapati’s life and works with special reference to his relevance to the field of Western esotericism, especially given his discernible imprint on Theosophical and Thelemic literature.

Given Sabhapati’s publications, his prominence, and later influence, it is remarkable that he is scarcely mentioned in modern western academic works on the historical development of modern yoga. De Michelis’s *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (2008) and Singleton’s *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010)³ are two of the foremost examples. There are, however, a few academic and non-academic English-language scholars that treat Sabhapati, of which the most notable are Karl Baier (see Baier 2009, 2012, 2016) and Henrik Bogdan (see Bogdan 2014; Crowley and Curwen 2010), who have respectively dealt with Sabhapati’s work in relation to both Theosophy and Thelema. Other twentieth-century and contemporary authors who have mentioned him in their works or annotations include T. K. Rajagopalan (c. 1880–1960) (Rajagopalan 2005 [1945]), Arjan Dass Malik (1938–2006) (Malik 2002), Bill Breeze (Crowley et al. 2004 [1997]), Kurt Leland (Leland 2016), Phil Hine (Hine 2016, 2018), and Tobias Churton (Churton 2019).

²By “early modern yoga” I mean the period from the start of the British East India Company’s colonial expansion in the seventeenth century to Swami Vivekananda’s publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896, which is an accepted date for the start of modern yoga according to Elizabeth de Michelis (2008; see below) and most scholars in the growing field of “Yoga Studies” today.

³Singleton’s excellent book deals with Sabhapati’s editor Shrish Chandra Vasu/Basu (see below) but does not refer to Sabhapati, although he does provide a reference to Sabhapati’s work in his bibliography.

There seem to be two overarching and overlapping reasons that most authors have either forgotten or neglected to engage Sabhapati's works in their own research. One reason is that Sabhapati's yogic techniques do not neatly fit into the trajectory of what de Michelis has termed Modern Postural Yoga, a category that has recently been expanded to encompass other typologies of yoga, yet one that remains a dominant frame that drives scholarship. Put simply, the emphasis in Sabhapati's Vedānta-inflected version of Rājayoga or "Yoga of Kings" (Birch 2013) is not on postural practice but on meditations and mental refutations of the *cakras*, although obtaining a steady posture (*āsana*) is considered a prerequisite for these techniques and there is a short portion of his work in which ten *āsanas* are outlined (Swamy 1884/1890: 104–105). In this respect, Sabhapati's teachings resemble those of Swami Vivekananda; however, the two systems do not arise from the same context and thus both deserve examination on their own terms.⁴ The main distinction is that Sabhapati's teachings on *rājayoga* predate Vivekananda's repackaged form of Pātāñjalayoga, the yoga of Patañjali known through the famous c. fourth-century CE *Yoga Sūtras* and their commentary by Vyāsa (i.e., the *Pātāñjalayogāsāstra*; see Maas 2006; White 2014; Larson 2018), which may have been a pseudonym for Patañjali or Vindhyavāsin, depending on how one attributes authorship of the *Yoga Sūtras*. Although Sabhapati does include a small excerpt on Pātāñjalayoga in the aforementioned portion on *āsanas*, Sabhapati's embodied practices are framed in both his English and Indic vernacular works as a local Tamil genre of yoga known as "Śivarājayoga,"⁵ a fusion of yogic practices and techniques that resemble Tamil Siddhar literature, most notably the c. twelfth-century *Tirumantiram*, attributed to one Tirumūlar. Sabhapati also adds a blend of both Saiddhāntika and Vedāntic doctrines of Tamil Vīraśaiva origin that

⁴The first Ramakrishna Mission in South India was founded in 1897 in Madras (modern Chennai) by Svāmī Rāmakṣṇānanda, seventeen years after the date of Sabhāpati's first extant publication.

⁵The emphasis on Śivarājayoga (Tamil *civarājayōkam*; possible translations: "the Yoga of King Śiva," "Śiva's Yoga of Kings," "The Royal Yoga for Śiva") as a distinct category is well-articulated in the Indic vernacular literature on Sabhāpati that spans the linguistic worlds of Tamil (Yōkīśvarar 1894; Cuvāmikaḷ 1913), Hindustani (Svāmī 1892), Urdu (Svāmī 1883), Bengali (Svāmī 1885), and Marathi (Swamy 1884/1890: 427–434) in addition to Sanskrit and English as well as Telugu (as bibliographic records attest). Śivarājayoga lives on, independently of Sabhapati Swami, in contemporary Tamil literature on yoga (Ceṭṭiyār 2016; Kailāṣnāt 2012).

appear related to an earlier genre of yoga called “Śivayoga” (Powell 2018),⁶ and which also incorporate Vaiṣṇava and Śākta themes, which was a feature of the *Tirumantiram* as well many centuries earlier (Sanderson 2009: 286–287, n. 686; Fisher 2013: 229–30).

A second reason is that Sabhapati’s encounters with founding members of the Theosophical Society, and particularly the adoption of his techniques into Thelema by the British occultist and poet Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), call for a more nuanced examination of religious history during the colonial period. Some of the dynamics at play in these occult literatures reveal the limitations of most postcolonial or subaltern critiques or when attempting to adequately discern the motivations of these occultist mediators who brought aspects of Sabhapati’s teachings to Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Following Edward Said (1935–2003), prevailing theories of political “post-orientalism” are naturally predicated upon a perceived exoticisation or “othering” by colonial powers to facilitate greater political and economic hegemony (see Said 1979). While colonisers certainly committed numerous abuses during their rule, Saree Makdisi has astutely noted (Makdisi 2014) that there were many individual “exceptions” to the colonial project, such as William Blake. Like Blake, at least some occult authors often had strained or complex relations with the colonial project and its accompanying bourgeois mentality, even if some did at times hold nationalist views (for Crowley’s own complicated relationship to England, see Pasi 2014: 36–42).

As a result, the views of such authors deserve to be described in more nuanced terms, just as scholars have pointed out the need to nuance popular and absolutist generalisations of colonial-era history (see, for example, White 2006). The situation becomes even more blurry when examining the Indian side of Sri Sabhapati Swami’s reception history, where we find a primarily pan-Indian network of “Admirers”. These Admirers appear most prominently in Sabhapati’s pan-Indian works written in English, where they explicitly represented themselves as Hindus seeking to openly

⁶In one of his Tamil works Sabhapati aligns himself with the *paramparā* or “guru-lineage” of the c. seventeenth-century Viraśaiva philosopher Kumāratēvar and his student Tiruppōrūr Cītampara Cuvāmikaḷ. An analysis of the relationship of these figures to Sabhapati’s literature is forthcoming in the third chapter of the author’s dissertation (Cantú 2020). In the meantime see Steinschneider 2016 for an excellent description of Kumāratēvar, his teacher Cāntaliṅka Cuvāmikaḷ, and Tiruppōrūr Cītampara Cuvāmikaḷ’s general philosophy and works in the context of the “warring sects” of Tamil Śaivism.

convey the perceived truth of their teachings, not only within India but also to outside or “foreign” networks of interested readers, especially in order to prevent “the Atheism” from gaining a foothold in India under British rule (Swamy 1884/1890: 24). The complexity of the motivations behind these sorts of exchanges warrants a more rigorous historical examination, especially since the Admirers’ eagerness to disseminate knowledge to outsiders appears to complicate rigid views on “Western” yoga as a cultural appropriation of Hinduism (see Vitello 2010). At the same time, it cannot be denied that occult authors, Crowley included, openly sought to expand the limits of Sabhapati’s teachings beyond the confines of “Hindu Vedantism” proper, that is, outside the Hindu religious discourse of Sabhapati’s Admirers.

WHO WAS SRI SABHAPATI SWAMI?

Sri Sabhapati Swami was born around 1828 to a family of either Brahmin Deccani or Naidu of Telugu-speaking origin in Velachery, then a separate village that has since been incorporated as a suburb of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. His father was named Gurunatha Baktar (Gurunāta Paktar) and his mother was named Punyavathi (Puṇṇiyavati), and his father was in the service of one Vedashreni Chidambara Swamigal (Vētacirēṇi Citambara Cuvāmikaḷ), whose sacred tomb in Velachery still attracts both devotees and yogis today. Sabhapati’s hagiographical account in English (henceforth ur-account, likely written by Shrish Chandra Vasu and later translated into Hindustani and Bengali) gives the date of Sabhapati’s birth as 1840. This is also reflected in the first Tamil account of his life (T1, found in Cuvāmikaḷ 1889), which gives this date as 4941 of the Kali Yuga (Tam. *kaliyukam*). However, a second Tamil account (T2, found in at least two surviving copies of Cuvāmikaḷ 1913) gives the date 1828 along with more precise astrological details, and for various historical reasons, I consider it more likely that Sabhapati was born closer to this date if not in that exact year.⁷

⁷I consider T2’s dating to be more accurate since it corroborates other known details of his life, particularly his relationship with his first guru Vedashreni Chidambara Swamigal, who died in 1858. If we take T2 at its word that Chidambara met with Sabhapati when he was as old as twenty-nine or thirty, then out of the two options Sabhapati must have been born in 1828 and not 1840 as that would place this meeting in 1869 or 1870, at least a decade after Chidambara’s death, widely confirmed in both textual and inscriptional evidence at his sacred tomb (*jīva-samādhi*) in Velachery. T2’s attention to minute astrological

After being educated at Free Church Mission School,⁸ Sabhapati travelled to Burma (Myanmar) on a textile trade business trip with his father-in-law, where he interacted with Buddhist *phonggyis*, that is, Burmese monks. Returning to Tamil Nadu, he soon departed for the predominantly Islamic *maraiikkāyar* (lit. “kings of the boat”) port city of Nagore near Nagapattinam, where he interacted with fakirs at the sixteenth-century Dargah or “shrine” of the Sufi elder Shāh al-Ḥamīd Nagurī (1490–1579) (Bayly 1989: 91–92; Narayanan 2006).⁹ Following his travels to Burma and Nagapattinam (which apparently lasted around three years, although the accounts differ on the timing and order of events), one of Sabhapati’s “admirers” and the author of the ur-account mentions that, despite his exploits in comparative religion, his “mind was not at ease” and that he was still “far from obtaining the *true Spirituality*” (Swamy 1884/1890: 2).¹⁰

After seven years working as a civil servant, remaining with his wife and two sons, and studying various scriptures, anxiety gave way to a dream at the age of twenty-nine (ur-account) or thirty (T2). In the dream the “Infinite Spirit”—in Sabhapati’s English works always a translation of the Brahman or Śiva as Sarveśvara, “the Lord of All”—appeared and told him to go to the “Agastya Āśrama.”¹¹ Sabhapati instead went to Vedashreni (Vedaśreṇi, “the Refuge of the Vedas”), an alternate name for his place of birth and a once rural temple area that is now a rapidly developing information-technology district in modern Chennai (Velachery, Tamil:

details and the specifics of his parentage also implies that the author, Shivajnanaprakash Yogishwara, had probed Sabhapati more deeply about the circumstances of his birth and had paid much more attention in general to chronological details, at least as pertains his early life. Additionally, T1 does not provide a Gregorian equivalent to the Kali Yuga year, meaning that the calculation could possibly have reflected a different correlation closer to 1828.

⁸This Scottish Protestant missionary school was founded by Rev. Robert Johnston and Rev. John Anderson (see Braidwood 1862), and today has been reconstituted as Madras Christian College.

⁹While Shahul Hamid Naguri is sometimes linked to the Chishti *ṭarīqa*, his hagiographical literature records that he became a close student of the Shaṭṭārī adept Muḥammad Ghawth Gwāliyārī (d. 1563).

¹⁰“Spirituality” is Sabhāpati’s antiquated translation of Tamil *pirummakiyānam* (Skt. *brahmajñāna*), lit. “gnosis of the *brahman*.” The unique English translations in his works predate later standardization of translations for Sanskrit terms yet are nevertheless philologically interesting. A lexicon is being prepared that tracks the linguistic development of many such terms and compounds as they occur in translation (Cantú 2020).

¹¹For the broader significance of Agastya in South Indian political and medical discourse, see Weiss 2009.

Vēḷaccēri).¹² After three days and nights in continual meditation (*dhyāna*), the accounts agree he obtained a vision (“darshonum”; Tam. *taricaṇam*; Skt. *darśana*) of Mahādeva (“the Great God,” an epithet of Śiva), who expressed to him certain mysteries of his “phallic stone” (Tam. *liṅkam*; Skt. *liṅga*). It was there that the Infinite Spirit again communicated to Sabhapati his desire for him to travel to his hermitage, which was not in Vedashreni but deep in the densely-forested wilderness of the southern Nilgiri (Nīlgiri, “Blue Mountain”) region of South India—specifically, at the Pothigai Hills situated on the border of the modern Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. After a long journey through Suruli, Sathuragiri, Courtallam, and finally Papanasam, he encountered his guru Satgurunath Shivajnana Bodha Yogishwarar (Carkurunāta Civañānabōta Yogīśvarar)¹³ near Agastyamalai (“Agastya’s Mountain”), and was welcomed as a student. After staying there for nine or twelve years, Sri Sabhapati Swami then embarked on a lecture expedition with a newly-found spiritual passion. The accounts agree that he published a scriptural text (*śruti*) in Tamil,¹⁴ and also went on pilgrimages to many of the major Hindu temple complexes in India and Nepal (including Kedarnāth, Muktināth, and Paśupatināth).

Sabhapati next spent at least six months at Lahore, which was then the primary city of British Punjab (see Talbot and Kamran 2016; Glover 2008) and undoubtedly an important stop on his lecture expedition. There he

¹²In several of his works Sabhapati notes that he had Citampara Cuvāmikaḷ (a.k.a. Citampara Periya Cuvāmikaḷ, (d. 1858) of Vēḷacceri as his guru, most likely referring to a disciple of Kuḷantaivēḷ Cuvāmikaḷ in the *paramparā* of Kumāratēvar. It is possible that Citampara Periya Cuvāmikaḷ died before Sabhapati arrived or that he was accepted by one of his surviving disciples in the *paramparā*.

¹³Basic details for Civañānabōta are as of yet unknown, as he is not listed in any sources I have been able to consult. One possible candidate is Carkurunāta Svāmikaḷ, considered the nineteenth avatar of Agastya (Kailāśnāt 2012:4–6), although this cannot yet be conclusively determined. A woodcut print depicting Civañānabōta together with Agastya and Sabhapati (with his later name Gurupitā) is given in Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, in which their artistic depictions resemble those of the medieval Tamil Siddhars (Venkatraman 1990; White 1996).

¹⁴This text, now lost if indeed composed, was apparently entitled *Vēṭānta sittānta samā-rasa pīrummakīyāṇa civarājaṇōka kaivalya aṇupūti*. The title is remarkably similar to Swamy 1884/1890 and Svāmī 1892, and to another work mentioned in a catalogue page of Yōkīśvarar (1894). Given these similarities it may have formed the basis for some of Sabhapati’s vernacular instructions that still survive. For an analysis of the various streams of Sabhapati’s literature see the author’s dissertation (Cantú 2020).

met, among others,¹⁵ his future editor Shrish Chandra Vasu (a.k.a. S.C. Vasu, Śrīś Candra Basu, 1861–1918),¹⁶ a Bengali who was then a student at Government College Lahore, where his father Shyamacharan Basu (Syāmācaraṇ Basu) had migrated from Tengra Bhabanipur (Ṭeṃgrā-Bhavānīpur), which prior to the Partition of Bengal in 1905 was in Khulna District and today is in Satkhira District, Bangladesh. Shrish Chandra’s collaboration with Sabhapati in 1880 to publish his lectures in an English pamphlet with transliterated Sanskrit terms marks an important point in what was to become his lifelong interest in yoga, an interest that had been previously sparked in childhood by a neighbouring “Kanphata yogi” named Shivanath (Śivanāth) who followed the teachings of the medieval Nāth Yogī Gorākhnāth (Bose 1932: 70).¹⁷ Shrish Chandra’s edition of Sabhapati’s lectures were popular and reprinted in 1883, 1890, 1895, 1920, 1950, and even as late as 1977, including by R. C. (Ratan Chand) Bary & Sons, a publishing outfit that also worked with the Sanskrit pandit Rāma Prasād (c. 1860–1917), who was also Shrish Chandra’s contemporary and fellow student at Government College. It also attracted the attention of Max Müller, who cited it in the context of yogic “miracles” (Müller 1899: 462–464). Later this work was expanded into a work divided into two books that were sometimes bound in a single volume (Swamy 1884/1890), which included most of the technical yogic terms in Tamil, Devanāgarī, and Roman, and contained a wide array of visual diagrams. These two books subsequently made their way to the United States, where the early twentieth-century New Thought author William Estep published a stripped-down version of their contents after traveling to India to study with Sabhapati, according to his claim (Swami and Estep 1929).¹⁸ In addition, Shrish Chandra sponsored a Bengali translation of the 1880 pamphlet, translated with a new introduction by Ambikacharan Bandopadhyay

¹⁵ Apart from the Theosophists (see below), Sabhapati met John Campbell Oman (1841–1911), a lecturer at the Government College Lahore and academic mentor of Shrish Chandra Basu. Oman mentioned meeting Sabhapati during the latter’s visit and published a brief account of his *rājayoga* (Oman 1889: 30–33).

¹⁶ Vasu’s family name is transliterated Basu according to Bengali orthography.

¹⁷ For a useful article on the Nāth Sampradāya that contains a useful bibliography with many extant sources, see Mallinson 2011. For a comparative survey that examines the yoga of the Nāth Yogīs, see White 2009. For a recent translation of the “sayings” (*bānī*) of Gorākhnāth, see Djurdjevic and Singh 2019.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Philip Deslippe for bringing Estep’s journey to India to my attention. While there is no proof that Estep met and studied with Sabhapati, more research is necessary on this front to confirm or deny this claim.

(Ambikācaraṇ Bandyopādhyāy),¹⁹ which can still be found in some libraries in Kolkata (Svāmī 1885; see Cantú 2018).

According to his biographer (Bose 1932: 87), Shrish Chandra also authored the poem entitled “The Yogi’s advice to his Country,” attributed to Sabhapati Swami in some of his works (Swamy 1884/1890: 27; Swami 1895), which employs the typical colonial-era trope of India’s decline yet promotes the Yogīs—not practitioners of modern postural yoga but rather the “Yogies” of the Agastya ashram in the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu—as the inheritors of the glory of the past. Shrish Chandra’s interest in these political dimensions of yoga would only continue as he went on to enter the legal profession, to formally study Sanskrit and produce a celebrated edition of Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, and to become a member of the Theosophical Society, Brahmo Samaj, and participate in but not join Arya Samaj (he refused to sign the Arya Samaj’s pledge-form attesting to the infallibility of the Vedas). Along the way, he published translations of quite a few texts on yoga, including early editions of the c. fifteenth-century Haṭhayogic text *Śiva Saṃhitā*,²⁰ the c. seventeenth-century *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*, and a translation of a Sufi yogic work by the seventeenth-century Mughal prince Dārā Shukūh (1615–1659). Shrish Chandra’s translations and writing on yoga went on to inspire occultist milieus in Vienna and London (Baier 2018; see also Cantú 2017) and, as Mark Singleton points out in his landmark study, he also later emerged as an important figure in early twentieth-century Hindu reformism prior to Indian independence with his *Sacred Books of the Hindus* series (Singleton 2010; see also Bose 1932). His younger brother Baman Das Basu (Bāman Dās Basu, 1867–1930) was also a prolific author on Ayurveda, politics, education, and yoga (Caṭṭopādhyāy 1932; Chatterjee 1930) and undoubtedly would have been aware of his brother’s interest in Sabhapati.

Whereas the ur-account ends with Sabhapati’s stay in Lahore and relationship with Shrish Chandra Vasu, a further section of Sabhapati’s trilingual work as well as his Tamil works record his return to the Pothigai Hills to experience a vision of Agastya, an event that was said to only happen

¹⁹ Basic details on the life of this translator are unfortunately still lacking.

²⁰ Mallinson in the introduction to his critical translation of *Śiva Saṃhitā* (2007: xi; see also Mallinson 2018: 184) criticises Vasu for “prudishly” omitting verses on the *vajrolīmudrā* in his translation. While Mallinson is correct in noting that Vasu did indeed omit these verses in the *Sacred Books of the Hindus* series (1914), Vasu nevertheless included them in his earlier translation for Dhole’s *Vedanta Series* (1893).

once every fifty years (Swamy 1884/1890: 19; Cuvāmikaḷ 1913: 11). It was not long before he travelled north again, however, and a reference in *The Theosophist XI* reveals that he was in Bombay for two months in 1890 where he “delivered a series of six lectures in the Framjee Cowasjee Institute on Creation and Evolution and Purification of mind and soul,” accompanied by diagrams, and initiated “some hundreds of men into the practical system of Raj-Yoga, as he calls it” (Shroff 1890).²¹ It is likely that Sabhapati’s subsequent popularity in Bombay inspired a publication of his Hindustani work (Svāmī 1892), which does not name an editor or translator but does provide a song praising Sabhapati by the pandit Jvalaprasad Mishra (Jvālaprasād Mīśra, 1862–1916) of Moradabad, an important figure in the formation of Hindi literature (Sūda 1986: 78–84) who likely assisted with its publication in that language.²²

Sabhapati’s subsequent works in Tamil indicate that he afterwards returned to Chennai and established what he called a “Meditation Hall” (Tam. *maṭṭālayam*; Skt. *maṭha* + *ālaya*) in Konnur, then a small village adjacent to Villivakkam on the outskirts of Madras (Yōkīśvarar 1894; Svāmikaḷ 1898). Although he continued teaching yoga to students, his main Tamil works (Cuvāmikaḷ 1889; Yōkīśvarar 1894; Cuvāmikaḷ 1913) notably do not seem to mention either Shrish Chandra Vasu’s name or editorial assistance at all.²³ Instead, Sabhapati went on to attract many regional followers throughout Tamil Nadu until his death. These followers not only lived in Madras but were spread out around the Nilgiri Hills in Udthagamandalam (Ooty, then a British hill station and summer capital, nicknamed “Snooty Ooty”), Coonoor, as well as elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, including Tiruchirappalli, as attested by a list of names given in one of his Tamil works (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913: 6).

One of Sabhapati’s most important students by 1913 was Konnur Ramalinga Swamigal (Konnūr Irāmaliṅka Cuvāmikaḷ, 1856–1936), who held the post of “chief of the meditation hall” (*maṭṭātipati*) after the previous chief’s departure or death (Capāpati Cuvāmikaḷ 1913: 3). Ramalinga’s student Anandananda Swamigal (Ananta Ānantā Cuvāmikaḷ alias Raman Nair; d. 1983), a former military officer from Kerala, inherited the

²¹ I am grateful to Kurt Leland for bringing this reference to my attention.

²² I am grateful to Jason Schwartz for pointing out Jvālaprasād Mīśra’s broader significance in the development of Hindi literature.

²³ A detailed treatment of Sabhapati’s vernacular works are outside the scope of this chapter but have been engaged at length in the second chapter of the author’s dissertation (Cantú 2020).

Meditation Hall upon Ramalinga's death in 1936, a small area of which is still extant today (Muthalali 1936; Ceṭṭiyār 2019). Another equally important Tamil student was Om Prakash Swami (Om Prakāsa Cuvāmīkaḷ, 1872–1947), an engineering draftsman and member of the Indian occult society Latent Light Culture who worked at the Mysore Palace before deciding to pursue a career as a Haṭhayogin and the author of an eclectic Vedāntic work entitled *Sri Sathsambhashini* (Swami 1939 [1915]). According to his biographer, Om Prakash came across one of Sabhapati's books while at the Mysore Palace, exchanged letters with him from Udhagamandalam, and was initiated by him in a dream on a full-moon night before meeting one of his students (Pillai 1957: 13–20).²⁴

Based on extant documentation we can infer that Sabhapati must have died between 1913 and 1936. Evidence gleaned from my interview with Anandananda Swamigal's student Hariharan Swami (Pi. Pi. Ār. Hariharan Cuvāmīkaḷ, c. 1935–2019) at a remaining site of Sabhapati's Meditation Hall, which was once much larger in size, suggests that he died in either 1923 or 1924 (Swamigal 2018).²⁵ Another interview I conducted with a man whose father knew Ramalinga Swamigal personally also provides evidence that Konnur in Villivakkam was Sabhapati's place of death (Ceṭṭiyār 2019). While tradition holds that Sabhapati's sacred tomb (Skt. *jīva-samādhi*) is in the extant site of his meditation hall or matha, the precise location has yet to be conclusively proven.

CAMP THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical Society's response to Sabhapati's literature has been recently analysed by Karl Baier in a paper that examines the Theosophical Society's broader engagement with South Asian systems of the *cakras* in

²⁴ Om Prakash is today still celebrated at a hermitage bearing his name in Kandal, a town adjacent to Udhagamandalam. I visited this site in the summer of 2018 and am grateful to Sravanan Sami for sharing books about his life to me, both of which clarify Om Prakash's relationship with Sabhapati, as well as a duplicate copy of one of Sabhapati Swami's rare primary works.

²⁵ Sabhapati is referred to as still being alive and accepting visitors in 1913, and by that time he would have already been around eighty-five years old. As we have already seen, T2 appears to give the most detailed data on his birth, placing it in Mazhkali (December/January) of 1828. Hariharan Swamigal recalled with relative certainty in an interview that Sabhapati lived to be ninety-five years old, which enables us to tentatively situate Sabhapati's year of death as either 1923 or 1924 (Swamigal 2018).

great detail (Baier 2016). Baier's treatment of the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century author Baradā Kānta Majumdār is compelling and insightful, especially the contrast he draws between his approach to tantric literature as opposed to that of Dayananda Saraswati (Dayānanda Sarasvatī 1824–1883), an important Hindu reformist and early leader of the Arya Samaj (see also Scott 2016). Rather than attempting to repeat Baier's analysis, I will here limit my remarks to a brief summary of the stated facts regarding the Society's encounter with Sabhapati Swami.

The Theosophical Society's founding members are considered to be Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907) who, along with other prominent supporters such as William Quan Judge (1851–1896), held a public meeting to establish the Theosophical Society at Blavatsky's New York apartment in 1875. As Joscelyn Godwin (1994: 307–331) mentions, both arrived in Bombay (today's Mumbai) a few years later, on February 16, 1879. Olcott records (Olcott 1900: 258) that he and Blavatsky met Sri Sabhapati Swami on November 8, 1880, in Lahore after Olcott had delivered a lecture on the occasion of the third anniversary of the founding of the Lahore Arya Samaj the previous day, which at that time was led by Sain Dass (Lālā Sāin Dāss, d. 1890) and Ruttun Chund Bary (also transliterated Lala Rattan Chand Barry; Ratan Candra Bairī, c.1849–1890), a Punjabi clerk in the Lahore Accountant-General's Office who would go on to join the Theosophical Society and also reprint Sabhapati's books in English (see Cantú 2020; Jones 1976; Bowen 2020). Olcott's lecture was followed by an impromptu address by Sabhapati Swami, which is also attested in Olcott's handwritten personal diary for 1880, which I have personally consulted at the archives of the Theosophical Society in Adyar.²⁶ However, soon after they met there appears to have been a falling out over his description of a religious experience at Manasarovara (Mānasarovara), a sacred lake today in modern Tibet, from where he flew to commune with Mahadeva on Mount Kailash (Swami 1880: iii–iv). Given Olcott's later acceptance of a wide array of Theosophical phenomena, it is somewhat strange that he and Blavatsky were greatly disenchanted with Sabhapati after they met with him

²⁶The programme for this event was preserved in Blavatsky's scrapbook that is also preserved at the archives of the Theosophical Society in Adyar. Sabhapati's name is not listed on the programme but we know from corroborating accounts that he addressed the crowd. For more details on this address and on those who were in attendance see the first chapter of the author's dissertation (Cantú 2020).

personally and he recounted his vision in terms of a physical experience. 325
Olcott (1900: 258–259) writes: 326

Whatever good opinion we may have formed of him before was spoilt by a 327
yarn he told us of his exploits as a Yog [*sic*]. He had, he said, been taken up 328
at Lake Mânsarovara, Tibet, high into the air and been transported two 329
hundred miles along the high level to Mount Kailâs, where he saw Mahadeva! 330
Ingenuous foreigners as H.P.B. and I may have been, we could not digest 331
such a ridiculous falsehood as that. I told him so very plainly. If, I said, he 332
had told us that he had gone anywhere he liked in astral body or clairvoyant 333
vision, we might have believed it possible, but in physical body, from Lake 334
Mânsarovara, in company with two Rishis mentioned in the Mahabharata, 335
and to the non-physical Mount Kailâs—thanks, no: he should tell it to 336
somebody else. 337

Compare this with Olcott’s unpublished diary entry for November 8, 338
which reads as follows: 339

Sabhapaty Swami came [to] us with Birj Lal & another & stopped from 9 ½ 340
am to 4 pm. His talks are right, but seems to me a possible humbug as his is 341
not a spiritual face, and he tells a ridiculous story about being able to fly 342
bodily 200 miles through the air.²⁷ 343

Whether it was Sabhapati’s flight, his perceived lack of a “spiritual face,” 344
or Olcott’s intuition that he was a “humbug,” he and Blavatsky subse- 345
quently abandoned any support they may have previously had for his 346
work. At the same time, a little over a week after their November 8 meet- 347
ing, on November 16, 1880, Sabhapati had an open letter published in 348
the English-language newspaper *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*. Sabhapati in 349
the letter, composed in English with his own archaic transliterations from 350
Sanskrit, recounts his own much more favourable impression of the 351
meeting: 352

I remained with them from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. of the 8th November 1880. 353
had a long conversation with them on the theory and practice of ancient 354
occult science (*Sarva Siddhoo Shastras*) and on the *Vedantic Giyana Yog* 355
Shastras i.e., the science and holding communion with one’s Self Impersonal 356
God—The Infinite Spirit. Their explanations of these two branches of secret 357

²⁷ Henry Olcott’s unpublished personal diary for 1880, entry “Monday, November 8, 1879,” held at the Theosophical Society Archives in Adyar, Chennai.

knowledge of our ancestors were on the whole perfectly correct, and in harmony with my own practical knowledge of them. They agreed with all my main points, and I am fully convinced that they have gained some practical acquaintance of both these sciences.²⁸

In the letter, he then went on to lavishly praise Blavatsky for her “considerable progress in *yoge*,” but is curiously silent about his impressions of Olcott. In any event, Sabhapati only later appeared as a significant figure in early Theosophy via a partial translation into German by the occult author Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) (see Svāmī 1908a, b; Hartmann 1909; Svami 1926), and to a much lesser extent via a translation of portions of his biographical account into French by the President of Le Disciple Branch of the Theosophical Society in Paris, Paul Gillard (d. 1901) (Gillard 1897).²⁹

An intriguing response to Olcott’s rejection of Sabhapati can be traced in later editions of Sri Sabhapati Swami’s works and Theosophical literature. For example, later reprints of his 1880 work adds the following editorial footnote (Swami 1895a, iv, 1950: 15), presumably written by Basu, in the part of Sabhapati’s account that mentions this vision:

This need not have been in the physical body of the Rishis; they might have flown towards the holy mountain in their Mayavi Rupa Kama Rupa [*sic*] (astral body), which to our author (who certainly is not an Adept in the sense the Theosophists use the word) must have been as real as if he had travelled through air in his physical body.

A second note also adjusts the identities of the Rishies (Skt. *ṛṣi*), who are changed from sages of the Mahābhārata to “Brothers of the Theosophical Society” (ibid.).³⁰ These footnotes were further commented upon by Damodar Mavalankar (Dāmodar Ke Māvalākar, b. 1857) in *The Theosophist*, who noted that “the Editor has, to some extent, in a special footnote

²⁸The letter is entitled “The Madras Yogi Sabhapaty Swamy, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott at Lahore,” and was dated November 16, 1880. It was preserved in Blavatsky’s unpublished scrapbook held at the Theosophical Society Archives in Adyar, Chennai.

²⁹I am grateful to Julian Strube for sharing with me more sources on Paul Gillard and his connection to French *fin de siècle* esoteric milieus.

³⁰Damodar was an early Theosophist from Ahmedabad, Gujarat who had been accompanying Olcott during much of this early trip in India and who was also a friend of Shrish Chandra.

hastened to extricate his hero and himself out of a really perilous situation” (Mavalankar 1884; see also Bowen 2020). The Bengali translation of the account of Sabhapati’s flight for its part appears to emphasise that Sabhapati was describing a state of *samādhi* and not a physical flight.

Despite these efforts, it seems that all this commotion over a “flight” did not daunt Sabhapati, who appeared content to continue his work with new networks of students (as stated above) outside the aegis of the Theosophical Society. At the same time, he also continued for at least a decade to “persuade all his disciples to join the Theosophical Society” (Shroff 1890: cxxiv), despite the fact that there is no record of Sabhapati ever joining the Theosophical Society himself. Henry Olcott for his part continued to maintain a sceptical distance from Sabhapati and discouraged people from “running after Yogis, Gurus, and Hermetic Brotherhoods of sorts,” also noting that “[...] while it is kind of [Sabhapati] to advise people to join the Theosophical Society, I should like to see his credentials before undertaking to believe that he ever went into or came out of Agasthya’s Ashrum” (ibid.). Sabhapati’s teachings on yoga did nevertheless continue to survive in certain circles of Theosophy, and to a limited extent were engaged by a separate occult order called Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor via Thomas M. Johnson (1851–1919), a Theosophist who tried to obtain one of Sabhapati’s books from Olcott, and via William Alexander Ayton (1816–1909), Johnson’s “guru” in that order (Bowen 2020: 148–149).

CAMP THELEMA

The continuing practice of certain aspects of Sabhapati’s system has also survived in Thelema, a modern religio-philosophical tradition inseparable from Aleister Crowley, in which the major tenets are “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” and “Love is the law, love under will.”³¹ Whereas feelings about Sabhapati were, at best, mixed among Theosophists, Crowley deeply appreciated his work. In his witty “Autohagiography” (Crowley 1970 [1929]) he wrote that he first became attracted to Sabhapati’s writings following his travels in 1901 to Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), where he visited his friend Allan Bennett (1872–1923), a fellow

³¹ For examples of both etic scholarly and emic sources that record the historical continuity of Thelema and the Ordo Templi Orientis from Crowley’s death into the present day, see Kaczynski et al. 2015, Starr 2003, Beta 1986, and Melton 1983: 67–89.

initiate in Crowley's occultist order, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Kaczynski 2010: 93–97; Pasi 2014: 12; Djurdjevic 2014: 37).³² An unpublished 1901 diary indicates that Bennett was competent in Sanskrit and interested in yogic meditation, and he later became the second European to receive a Theravāda Buddhist ordination, and the first in Burma (modern Myanmar) (Crow 2009). Before parting ways, Crowley and Bennett studied yoga with a Śaiva pandit named Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851–1930), who at the time was the Solicitor-General of Ceylon (see Vythilingam 1971).

The information given in Crowley's *Confessions* and diary is corroborated by the writings of Gerald Yorke (1901–1983), who wrote in his marginal notes to his copy of Kenneth Grant's *Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God* that Crowley told him he “did get Tantrik knowledge from Subhapati Swami [*sic*] in Madras.”³³ While the reference to Sabhapati is important, there is no additional proof that Crowley himself ever considered Sabhapati's knowledge as “tantric,” or that they physically met in Madras or elsewhere. Instead, Crowley elsewhere stated that he was exposed to the “writings” of Sabhapati Swami in Madurai through a man who “spoke English well and was himself a great authority on Yoga” (Crowley 1970: 255).³⁴ This is verified in a letter from Crowley to David Curwen (dated September 11, 1945), in which he recounts that he “was only at Madura for three days and was nobody's pupil” (Crowley and Curwen 2010: 49). Despite his letter to Curwen, Crowley elsewhere does seem to indicate that he received some sort of instruction in yogic meditation at Madurai, if only briefly. In his commentary to Helena P. Blavatsky's *The Voice in the Silence* (1899)—an interesting example of Thelemic commentaries on Theosophical works—he writes that he got a “certain point

³² While an intriguing possibility, there is no evidence that Crowley obtained his teachings on Sabhapati from the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, as Bowen understandably suggests as a possibility (Bowen 2020: 158) given the likely roots of some of Crowley's other practices in that order as well as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light.

³³ Quoted in Crowley and Curwen 2010: xxxiv. For more on Yorke's relationship to Crowley see Yorke et al. 2011.

³⁴ The fact that Crowley in his writings never claimed to be a tantric initiate or even practitioner complicates Hugh Urban's assertion (Urban 2003: 293) that Crowley has become “one of the most important figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West.” While this may be a popular sentiment, it is important to look at other mediating figures like Kenneth Grant (1924–2011) who helped transform Crowley's image into a *tāntrika*, albeit one who in Grant's view did not fully realise the importance of female sexual fluids (Hedenborg-White 2018).

in the body suitable for meditation” from his “*guru* in Madura” (Crowley et al. 1996: 301). Without more data, however, the identity of this guru is unfortunately impossible to determine.

Crowley cited Sabhapati favourably in numerous places, but perhaps the best indication of his methodical engagement with Sabhapati’s work is found in a typescript to Crowley’s March–April 1905 diary, which Bill Breeze published as a footnote in the second revised edition to Crowley’s *Magick: Book Four* (Crowley et al. 2004: 780). In the diary entry, Crowley summarises a passage from Sabhapati’s 1880 work that was reprinted in all subsequent English editions of Sabhapati’s text on *rājayoga*. Given Crowley’s emphasis on method, it should not be surprising that the passage he condensed is one of Sabhapati’s most practical and explicit instructions on Śivarājayoga:

Draw the light of your two eyes internally to *kuṇḍali* [i.e., a coil, for Sabhapati located at the base of the spine] by *idā* and *piṅgalā* respectively. Imagine the mind as a straight pole *brahmarandhra-kuṇḍali* and the consciousness at the bottom of this pole. Take hold of the consciousness by the two keennesses³⁵ of your eyes and pull it slowly up [...]. Keep consciousness in *brahmarandhra* for 20 min. more. Then drop and lift it through *suṣumnā* so fast that it takes less than 1 sec.³⁶

These kinds of dynamics in yogic physiology greatly inspired Crowley, who incorporated them into an instruction entitled *Liber HHH*, S.S.S. (see Crowley 1911: 13–14; Djurdjevic 2014: 50).

It is striking that the Tamil author and former Accountant-General of Madras, T. K. Rajagopalan (2005 [1945]: 76–80), also republished and commented upon this passage—apparently independently of Crowley. Rajagopalan linked the passage to “Tāraka Yoga,” or the “Yoga of the Pupil of the Eye” as a phase of “Amanaska Yoga,”³⁷ citing a similar technique given in part of the first and second *brāhmaṇams* (1.2–2.4) of the *Maṇḍalabrāhmaṇopaniṣad* (Śāstri and Rangāchārya 1899: 9–27), one of

³⁵ The original Sanskrit provided by Sabhāpati is *bhāvanā-jñāna*, which could be more accurately rendered as “gnosis of (or by means of) cultivation,” or in this context “meditative cultivation.”

³⁶ The original passage Crowley commented on is found in Swami 1880: 35–36; cf. also Swamy 1884/1890: 112–114.

³⁷ For an analysis of the relationship of the term *amanaska* to *rājayoga*, see Birch 2013: 406–409.

the *Yoga Upanishads*, and its commentary attributed to the celebrated Advaita Vedāntic philosopher Śaṅkara (generally thought to have lived in the late eighth and early ninth century).³⁸ Another author named Arjan Dass Malik (1938–2006), a former civil servant in the North Indian state of Haryana, was also enamoured of the technical dynamics at play in the above passage, noting that Sabhapati’s inclusion of both upwards and downwards flows of “consciousness” is significant. More specifically, Malik asserted that the swami “correctly mentions that the Kundalini having reached the top of the brain first descends to the *Ajñā* [i.e., the *ājñā cakra*] and later on ascends from the *Ajñā* to the top of the brain” (Malik 2002: 43).³⁹

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is hoped that these observations will help indicate a way in which Sri Sabhapati Swami can be better integrated into the discourses that surround the academic field of Western esotericism, and that they will also encourage more rigorous historical analyses of Theosophical and Thelemic engagement with South Asian yogic traditions. Additionally, the reception history of Sabhapati Swami’s literature demonstrates that a primary intent of some of these occult authors—at least as explicitly stated—was to learn and disseminate techniques that were deemed objectively efficacious, and not to intentionally exoticise or inscribe difference. This is perhaps most exemplified by the negative attitude towards “oriental” fascination with yoga in Crowley’s *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, who humorously stated the following (1985 [1939]: 13):

There is more nonsense talked and written about Yoga than about anything else in the world. Most of this nonsense, which is fostered by charlatans, is

³⁸ Śāstri in his edition of this text notes that this traditional attribution to Śaṅkara is unlikely, and that the attribution to an unnamed “disciple of Sadānandādhūta” (śrīśadāna ndādhūtaśiṣya) given in the colophon of one of the manuscripts he consulted is more likely. For a useful analysis of what works are thought by contemporary scholars to actually be written by Śaṅkara, see Clark 2006: 104–114. I am grateful to Nils Seiler for bringing to my attention current debates over what constitutes the authentic corpus of Śaṅkara’s works.

³⁹ It is interesting that Malik and Rajagopalan explicitly differentiate Sabhapati Swami’s yogic methods from those later published by John Woodroffe/Arthur Avalon (1865–1936), whose book and translation *The Serpent Power* later became one of the most common western source texts for teachings on *kunḍalinī*.

based upon the idea that there is something mysterious and Oriental about it. There isn't. Do not look to me for obelisks and odalisques, rahat lou-coum, bul-buls, or any other tinsel imagery of the Yoga-mongers. I am neat but not gaudy. There is nothing mysterious or Oriental about anything, as everybody knows who has spent a little time intelligently in the continents of Asia and Africa. I propose to invoke the most remote and elusive of all Gods to throw clear light upon the subject—the light of common sense.

Statements like the above by Crowley demonstrate that not all authors on yoga partook in the same orientalist project—if they partook in orientalism at all. Perhaps it is therefore more useful to speak of several “orientalisms,” not all of which are necessarily negative, thus discursively distinguishing: the political “orientalism” of Edward Said (see Said 1979) from the mystical pole-star “orientalism” of Henry Corbin (see Corbin 1994); the “orientalism” of Indologists as examined by David Smith (see Smith 2003); “Theosophical orientalism” as analysed by Karl Baier (see Baier 2016) and harshly critiqued by Christopher Partridge (see Partridge 2013); and perhaps even a Thelemic “orientalism” that also partakes in a kind of period-specific “anti-orientalism” (as evident by Crowley’s quote above). On the other hand, perhaps such an exploration into this kind of complex exchange will serve as a helpful reminder that, at the end of the day, the “orient” on this wide earth can be simply wherever the sun rises and the “occident” wherever it sets.

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